

**Statement of Mark Rey**  
**Under Secretary, Natural Resources and Environment**  
**United States Department of Agriculture**  
**Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural**  
**Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies**  
**February 27, 2002**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am pleased to appear before you today to present the Fiscal Year 2003 budget and program proposals for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) of the Department of Agriculture (USDA). I thank Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to appear, and I would like to express gratitude to the Chairman and members of this body for the support of additional funding for Fiscal Year 2002. With me this morning are Mr. Pearlie S. Reed, Chief of the NRCS; Ms. Brenda Thomas, who is the Acting NRCS Budget Director, and Mr. Dennis Kaplan from USDA's Budget Office. Also here this morning is Dr. R. Mack Gray, Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment.

Mr. Chairman, the President often reminds us that everyday is Earth Day when you work the land. From my perspective as Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, it is clear that the men and women of NRCS out in the field are making a tremendous difference to ensure that farmers and ranchers have the resources and expertise they need to care for natural resources and respond to emerging challenges.

In September, the Secretary released *Food and Agriculture Policy: Taking Stock for the New Century*. Conservation clearly has a central place in that document, and the

Administration's agriculture policy as a whole. Our conservation policy for agriculture is founded upon the following seven principles:

- Sustain past environmental gains
- Accommodate new and emerging environmental concerns
- Design and adopt a portfolio approach to conservation policies
- Reaffirm market-oriented policies
- Ensure compatibility of conservation and trade policies
- Coordinate conservation and farm policies
- Recognize the importance of collaboration

Mr. Chairman, what we have put forward is a look at total agriculture policy, and how it interrelates with real issues on farms and ranches across the country and throughout the nation's food delivery system. And I would submit that our success in these areas really depends upon what happens in this Subcommittee, because everything we do relates back to Conservation Operations – the fundamental investment in conservation assistance to farmers and ranchers.

## **Conservation Operations Program**

The success of USDA's entire conservation effort depends upon the availability of practical scientific and technological information that is used by field employees who carry out a host of federal state and local programs. NRCS develops and transfers applied technologies through the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG), including technical manuals, handbooks, and technical references. Collectively, NRCS provides science-based solutions for the work carried out on the nation's farms and ranches.

We know that farmers and ranchers are receiving exemplary service from NRCS field staff. In fact, NRCS has one of the highest ratings for customer satisfaction among all government and private-sector organizations. Last year, NRCS participated in the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which surveyed customers of NRCS conservation technical assistance. The ACSI is administered by the University of Michigan Business School. It is the only uniform, cross-industry/government measure of customer satisfaction, which allows benchmarking between the two sectors. The NRCS results were the highest for any USDA agency participating in the 2001 survey, and has been described as comparable to private sector companies such as Mercedes-Benz and Ritz-Carlton.

We are proud of the outstanding service that we are providing customers. Our customers have come to expect excellent service from the agency, and it will be a future challenge to continue to ensure that funding and resource support for our staff are sufficient to help

them meet the expectations of farmers and ranchers. Conservation Operations means the continued availability of nationwide cooperative soil survey information, climate and precipitation data and forecasting, and the National Resources Inventory (NRI). These technical tools ensure that we first have accurate baseline information regarding the natural resources, and also trends and changes over time. Our work in this area is tantamount to our success in multi-agency efforts, including our work with the Environmental Protection Agency on clean water issues relating to non-point source pollution livestock waste. Our resource information and science – based technology are absolutely essential to sound decision-making. Also, NRCS offers farmers and ranchers the voluntary assistance they need to meet emerging challenges. Overall, the Conservation Operations program is the keystone to meeting locally-led conservation policy objectives, by providing sound scientific data and common sense solutions for farmers and ranchers.

### **Resource Conservation and Development**

Mr. Chairman, because of the support of this Subcommittee, the Secretary was able to announce the selection of 20 new RC&D areas earlier this year, bringing the total number of authorized areas to 368. On a national scale, non-federal government agencies, including State, local, and Tribal governments, as well as private and not-for profit organizations are playing important roles in conservation policy. The RC&D program has been extremely successful in leveraging and matching resources between these organizations. These organizations come together at the local level to identify

community needs and collaborate on a voluntary basis. The RC&D program is a model for the kind of collaboration and partnership effort that our Food and Agriculture policy document describes. It provides an excellent return for a limited federal investment and we appreciate the continued support of this Committee.

### **Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations**

The President's budget for FY 2003 proposes to eliminate Watershed Surveys and Planning, Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations, and the Watershed Rehabilitation Program. The budget requests funding for Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) to provide assistance to local communities when disasters occur.

The NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program is a recovery program targeted to communities--as opposed to individuals--by relieving imminent hazards to life and property caused by floods, fires, windstorms, droughts and other natural occurrences. NRCS provides technical assistance and pays as much as 75 percent of the cost for emergency repairs, such as removing debris from a stream. We also purchase easements from willing landowners in flood prone areas to prevent future crop losses.

As our Farm Policy document points out, water and agriculture are inextricably linked. From looking at recent fiscal years, we know that emergency needs for watersheds resulting from natural disasters averages about \$110 million per year. However, rather than prepare for this need, we have historically relied upon emergency supplemental

appropriations to react to stricken communities, often months after the disaster occurred. Therefore, for 2003, we are requesting \$111 million in appropriated EWP funding which would better equip the federal government to respond more quickly to disasters and protect homeland security.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, the programs presented to this Subcommittee for funding are absolutely essential to the policy objectives proposed in our overall agriculture conservation policy framework. It really comes down to the following three points:

- (1) Support the cadre of trained, and skilled professionals out on the land, working with farmers and ranchers everyday through Conservation Operations.
- (2) Provide that workforce and the workforce of State and local government cooperators with the very best data, technical tools, and training through Conservation Operations.
- (3) Continue to foster collaboration and partnerships with other organizations through Conservation Operations and RC&D.

I thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to appear and would be happy to respond to any questions Members might have.